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WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Russian State Duma on June 26 passed a controversial bill on “causing offense to the sentiments of religious believers.” The bill now awaits only a presidential signature before becoming law, most likely on July 1. The bill would punish alleged offenses against religious sentiments by up to three years in prison.

“With space for free expression shrinking rapidly in Russia, enactment of this bill would further erode human rights protections in Russia,” said U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Chair Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett. “Speech limitations violate Russia’s international commitments, and this law will lead to abuse and arbitrary rulings against permissible speech that some deem ‘offensive.’”

First introduced last fall, the so-called “blasphemy law” has provoked an outcry from many who warn that the law would violate the Russian constitutional separation of religion and state, and predict that officials will use it to target critics of the Moscow Patriarchate. Many also assert that while the Duma's Social and Religious Organizations Committee, the Kremlin human rights council, and the Public Chamber all amended the bill, its major flaws were not addressed.

The bill states that “public acts held near religious sites that show blatant disrespect for society and intended to offend believers’ religious sentiments” would be penalized by fines of up to 300,000 rubles (more than \$9,000) or punished by forced labor or prison terms of up to one year. If alleged offenses are committed inside religious sites, the bill sets higher penalties, with fines of up to 500,000 rubles (more than \$15,000) or up to three-years of forced labor and prison plus post-imprisonment restrictions of up to one year. Russian citizens convicted of obstructing religious activities will face increased fines as will those who use their official positions for committing such an offense who also could face “corrective labor” of up to two years or a prison term of up to one year.

“ [When I was in Moscow in September 2012](#) , I raised concerns about this measure and the general respect for international human rights norms. If enacted, this new law gives credence to the view Russian human rights activists expressed to me that Russia is in full retreat from democracy and the rule of law,” concluded Dr. Lantos Swett.

USCIRF’s concerns about the deteriorating status of religious freedom is detailed in the 2013 Annual Report chapter on [Russia](#) .

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner please contact USCIRF at (202) 523-3258 or media@uscirf.gov